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The lessons of dedication, frugality, and contemplation I shared with my childhood pony serve as the foundations of my disposition and edify my visual language. In order to seek clarity in these lessons and connect with others through them, I turn to modest materials and essential forms. Musty remnants such as leather, twine, and reclaimed metal transform with my care into distilled gestural figures and essential constructions. In this thesis paper, I define the path that led me to this resolution.

GROOMINGS

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

To Andy Dunnill

I carry your lessons by otherwise making.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Kristin Alexandra Soler has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge the UNCG Art Department and Lawrence Jenkins for providing support and funding towards my journey to the essential.

I extend thanks to my friends and family back home who made my equestrian days possible. To my parents, I send recognition of the Sisyphean labor that was affording my pony. My mother deserves an additional note for freezing, burning, and bleeding with us through so many barn shifts and horse shows. Each of you, named or not, contributed heavily to make this work possible.

Final mention goes to my pony, Miracle on 34th, for being the root of it all.

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CHAPTER I

MIRACLE ON 34TH

"Miracle on 34th," or "Butch" as he is more commonly called, began as a bit of a reject. Bought by a thrifty horsewoman as a toss in with his fancy sister, the young colt suffered from a tendon problem and hobbled around on only three of his feet. Luck, attention, and special shoeing brought his fourth foot back to use while his sister went into training for a quick and easy profit.

That thrifty horsewoman was as compassionate as she was frugal and although she leased out one of her own horses to her student, the young girl was ready to move on. She was talented. She needed a pony of her own.

When I was eight and he was four, a white Christmas morning greeted my eldest sister with a confused and heavily decorated young Butch. The phrase, "There is a Santa Claus" was gaily plastered on his stall door. I do not even recall my own presents from that day; only his entrance into our lives.

My sister was his owner and used her skills and lessons to train him, but as we could not afford an additional animal for me, she was forced to share. I grew up learning to ride at the same time Butch was learning to be ridden, resulting in a subversion of traditional human dominance. We learned each other's language and expressed our opinions very much like siblings: fighting here, arguing there, but ultimately supporting each other. We were partners. In competition, he offered his body as an extension of my

own. Out of the saddle, I reciprocated this dedication: working to afford his accommodations, grooming his body, soothing his worries with treats and affection.

My sister was invested in a sport called the "hunters." In these events, a judge views a class of horse and rider combinations and orders the winners based on how closely the pair adheres to an ideal style of going, jumping, and riding. Because of its predetermined "perfect way of going" and subjective judging process, it is a sport that favors the affluent, their perfectly bred horses, and their access to ever changing fashions. Though not the easiest nor the fanciest pony, my sister poured her money and efforts into competing with her more privileged peers. She showed him regularly in the hunter circuit and even paid to have him ridden professionally in an attempt to mold him into a winning machine. The game she played held limited success. He was still the same club-footed gelding underneath the expensive tack and decorative braiding.

As the younger sibling, I was always the recipient of hand-me-downs. After my sister outgrew Butch and moved up to the adult circuit, he, too, was passed down. Although I initially followed in her hunter footsteps, I did not enjoy the premise. I was not built with a model's body and Butch would never win but so much against rich and impeccably bred "robot" horses. It was also expensive to be fashionable, and the idea of chasing two dollar ribbons with four hundred dollar helmets and eight hundred dollar custom boots challenged my practical nature. Butch and I grew weary of the endless drills around the exercise ring that demanded a monotonous pace and perfect form. Before we branched out into other sports, we focused on our cool down walks on deer trails. Without the rigorous etiquette of the show ring, we relaxed into each other's

company as we explored the wooded paths around the barn. There we found value in the most frugal of recreations.

Beyond just the pecuniary difference in our priorities, my sister and I contrast in sensibilities. I have always enjoyed working *with* rather than *using*. I take pleasure in what *is as it is* while she takes pride in *what she can master*. She bought into the hunter world of networking, breeding, and fashion and worked hard to please the judges' tastes. I switched to the time-based "jumper" circuit. In this sport, horse and rider teams focus on clearing a course of jumps in the fastest time. The clock had no opinion on pedigree nor fashion; success was based on speed. Suddenly, we went from an average contender to first place for the end of the year in our division. *That* kind of competition we could win. Contemplating our status, exploring our options, and embracing alternate possibilities in my partnership has taught me to seek beyond the surface potential of personalities and materials.

CHAPTER II

SECONDHAND LANGUAGE

Before coming to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in fall of 2014, my relationship to art had become lifeless. For my senior thesis exhibition in 2012, I made large metal sculptures of animals from parts of machines I felt related to them. It was an effort to create a cycle out of unsustainable consumption. Although my metal was free and found, my construction was hefty and spared little in material. I explored size, form, and material to a point, but after graduation I fell to the perceived necessity that my pieces would have to have homes upon their completion. Accessibility for my local audience superseded artistic exploration. I was rewarded with the moderate success one might expect from such an approach.

After only a year of streamlining my work for public consumption, I had had enough. I sat down to break my listless contentment and applied that fall for the following school year. Fortune smiled on me; I got accepted into the program and woke back up to the world of possibilities.

I do not know if I will ever be able to physically create as much trash work as I did in that first semester while I tried to remember how to make. In our first Drawing Marathon class with Andrew Dunnill, I was so stuck in the accessibility of a more naturalistic style that I crippled myself. "Should I get the ruler out," I had wondered on my leftover drawing pad, "sight and measure as in Drawing 101?" It only took a few

visits and critiques before I could delve back into the gestures I had loved so much. Ever fiscally aware and determined to find beauty in the inexpensive, I began drawing with kids' tempera paint in a contact solution bottle. I was asked repeatedly, "Why not try using proper paint or ink and some decent paper?" At that point, I was not sure. I just felt like I had to.

I began to work diligently on improving my metal sculpture. Still rooted in animal figures, I decided to peel off the unnecessary pieces and focus on the movement of the animals I was portraying. I then tried to challenge my forms away from recognizable animals altogether. Though I could not seem to lose the figure entirely, they were moving towards a more gestural, essential, and sophisticated construction that paralleled my drawings. Unfortunately, the work still brought me a host of embarrassing critiques for its folksy use of found metal, my inescapable history as a country bumpkin, and most importantly my inattention to details. In my rapidly shifting attention span and quick production, I had made piles of metal sketches outside of the steel shop. On one particularly sunny and dreadfully early morning at my foundry assistantship, I was drooling onto my reading when I was approached by one of the senior professors whom I had not yet met. I could not hide. Barely coherent, I stammered out that, yes, those sculptures were indeed mine and that, no, I did not think they were quite done yet. "Your work looks... tacked together," he said flatly before going about his business. I was mortified. This blunt declaration, however crushing at the time, reminded me that I must not forget to contemplate my connections in feverish production.

David Smith is my most notable artistic influence in reference to my sculpture and drawing. As a pioneer in American welded metal sculpture in the 1930s, he developed an extensive abstract language following and in response to the atrocities of World War II. His attitude concerning appropriations, non-academic art, and innovation made me question the structure of art as a subject in an institution. As a partially found, partially fabricated metal sculptor, Smith's work both challenged my obsessive use of existing materials and offered me a small space of validation: "Discarding the old methods and equipment will not of course make art," he said. "It has only been a symbol in creative freedom from the bondage of tradition and outside authority" (Selz 15). It was up to me as the artist to decide how to express my reality however I desired, but Smith advocated for stepping beyond the conventional strategies as a way to help facilitate invention. Originally a painter, Smith's handle on both two and three dimensional space and line fascinated me. From almost every angle his work presented a unique and interesting composition. Though rooted in figure and landscape, the work required no direct reference it to be appreciated. I hoped to achieve this delicate balance in my graduate work.

Thanks to a classmate who worked at the Greensboro Science Center, I was able to secure their abandoned and overgrown exhibit space as a location to use for Andy Dunnill's Site-Specific Sculpture class. Back at the animal forms, I was able to hide the pieces in the secluded space, embrace the ideas of limited visibility, and contemplate the artificial structure that we as humans can impose on our neighbors and their environment. It was a stepping stone to *something*, I just was not sure what yet.

Spring of 2015 proved that my abilities for rapid production were unsustainable. I exhausted my tempera drawings and could not seem to push them to the next level. No metal I touched sparked motivation. I grew apathetic towards the gallery setting as I learned more about the world of accepted and successful artists in the modern day biennials. Was I even sure I could be an artist if I did not want to participate in that aspect of art making? I just loved to *be* and to contemplate those experiences. I did not want to spend my life dedicated to chasing curators and galleries to *show* my life rather than to *live* it. That mentality felt reminiscent of the politics and money in the hunter world that I had already rejected as poisonous to the relationship of horse and rider. Pressure to create in graduate school continued to mount. I elevated Paper Mache as a cheap material into small wall pieces derived from the lines in my drawings, but there was something missing still. The scale was off and I needed to get out of the cramped studio to work through it. I began to construct numerous large rectangular frames from my found metal in an effort to connect to distant rolling hills and open pastures. In my sleep, I dreamt about the beings I had encountered in those spaces. Eyes of all sorts had met mine in the field. Dreaming about them brought back our conversations. I wanted to relive those exchanges.

It hit me as I took a friend to the Piedmont Triad International Airport. Along the road into the terminal, there was a lovely hillside with terribly boring landscaping on it. It was a portal, I had thought, to those absent places. I continued welding the series of roughly rectangular lines out of found metal to somehow capture that idea. Each rectangle assemblage would stick into the air and frame a section of the sky on a different

elevation along the hill. The distance would never reveal the frugally found nature of my metal material, but its location next to this artificial assemblage of plants offered that contrast. Unlike the roaming herd of deer whose stacked forms inspired me, I had to ask permission for the space and managed to get a few hours to set up, contemplate, and shoot photos before it had to come down once again. The resulting work was *The Act of Second Guessing* (Fig. 1). Finally, I was able to articulate this unspoken communication that I held dear.

Summer brought a month and a half adventure throughout Europe. I took the time to visit my former classmates from my past semester abroad in England, run down the infamously steep Cooper's Hill for the Cheese Roll, and of course visit art spaces such as the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. I met someone I can only assume was an international spy at the hotel lounge in Zurich, refused to pay for the bathroom on a twelve hour bus, and drank German beer with my colleagues inside an old war relic in Berlin. Prague, Budapest, Ljubljana, Plitvice, Rovinj, Venice: each city brought a unique adventure and its own challenges. It was the first time I had travelled without a predetermined checklist of experiences and I found I could do anything, get anywhere on a whim if I had the desire and dedication. This reaffirmation of my own self-reliance was liberating.

The final destination in our adventure was the Venice Biennale. I was overwhelmed by the sheer concentration of art in the city as my colleagues and I spent eight days combing through the ancient buildings and perfect country pavilions. Two pieces remain embedded into my mind. The first is a large sculpture of sewn coal sacks that hung outside the Arsenale in a narrow passage that led to the old shipyards.

Created by artist Ibrahim Mahama from Ghana, *Out of Bounds* spoke about consumerism, globalism, and inequality as it relates to us all in an overwhelming scale. It was solemn and quiet in comparison to the cluster of activity inside the Arsenale building, which appealed to my need to escape the bustle indoors. Mahama's use of inexpensive and simple materials provided an example of success in the essential.

The second work that I still carry in my mind is Enkhbold Togmidshiirev's *Huren Del*, 2015. A series of two square abstract paintings, the pieces calmed me as soon as I entered into their space at the Mongolian Pavilion. It was not until I read the tags that I realized why I felt so comforted. It was the natural elements he used. Horse dung, cotton, a wax end, and a sack were listed as painting materials and they gave off the earthy smell that brought my mind back to the barn where I groomed my horse. Smell was a medium I had not tried before, but one I wanted to in the future. I returned to the studio with a mind full of art and a desire to communicate in new mediums.

Solving the Hedgehog's Dilemma with the Help of a Child (Fig. 2), created for the Gatewood Gallery show "Linea 2" as a response to this trip, spearheaded this interest in alternative materials. A visual description of my contemplation of European nuances, the installation came in two distinct parts. The first part was a nonfunctional machine constructed from my beloved childhood building set and mixed knick-knacks that ran up and down the gallery wall in a few sections. The second part came from a used horse blanket on a wire armature stuffed with deodorant sticks. Lying on the floor in a vaguely hollow human shape, the blanket revealed a series of anxieties I felt both on the trip and at home. From smell and cleanliness to its floor-bound position, the blanket contrasted

uncomfortably with its playful partner. The goal of the wall piece was to build as naively as I had navigated the streets of Europe, and the result was an endearing linear form that tried to negate its more darkly humorous counterpart on the floor.

The fall of 2015 fell short of expectations as I fought to innovate and constrain my work to the gallery setting that I would have for the MFA show. I was stuck again and went back to drawing through my hang-ups. Make work for the gallery; make work for the gallery. I felt anxious and determined to make art for the white walls despite my committee's insistence to just simply make. The worry was as crippling as it was absurd, and it was not until the relief of winter break that I would begin to be able to sort and understand my material, my work, and myself.

Winter break into the spring semester of 2016 forced me out of the perpetual apprehension in my head and into more sensitive contemplation. I took the time to revisit my core values and define my motivations in order to tackle the last leg of my graduate school journey. The key that I had not fully accepted lay in my aging hand-me-down pony. Devotion, frugality, and contemplation repeated throughout all of my successful works in some form or other. Our relationship, which focused primarily on the mutual enjoyment of one another over dominance, status, and competition, softened my reflexive skepticism of any similar human construction.

From politics to religion to art, I feel that the natural occurrence of hierarchy inevitably will contaminate if not fully undermine the principles behind the concept. It is perhaps an egregious generalization on my part. I feel many riders, artists, politicians,

and churches have genuine intentions, but knowing how easily I caved to my buyers' desires after undergrad, I remain skeptical of the system.

Finally, I had a stance that, although not revolutionary in the history of the art, could help inform my details and jumpstart my next forms. Focusing on elevating the values I hold dear within an art school context, I have been able to produce my current thesis work with the gallery in mind as a specific site *integral* to the work rather than an exercise in institutional ceremony.

CHAPTER III

GROOMINGS

Metal lends itself well to my purpose both for its rigidity and its malleability. It allows me to adhere to the frugality of a gestural construction without sacrificing soundness. Each piece carries a memory and personality of its own, and I can train it, but I generally avoid changing *who* and *what* it was. The sensitivity to history in my amalgamation reflects my desire to find harmony in my sculptures, my life and the world outside myself. With the use of found metal specifically, I return to the dependence on resourcefulness that aided me in affording a pony in the first place. Remembering my companion's roots as an afterthought also motivates me to take time sifting through the world's detritus. If such an impactful personality like Butch was considered a toss-away, what pieces of metal and refuse could change my thinking if given the chance? How might the pieces be compelled to contribute their histories in the service of form? What can different pieces of metal or other materials do to reinvigorate the making process? I want to be an advocate for the value of these materials and find their beauty.

The finishing of the metal work has always been a moral struggle for me. Why cover the work in the same finish, paint, patina as is expected? For what purpose does this serve my work other than to declare subservience to this simplified narrative of create, finish, show in art gallery? Is this not the same motive that I reject as formulaic?

Am I just being stubborn? Aesthetic appreciation is not enough to accept the process without question; it must serve the work and not just the exterior world.

Spitshine (Fig. 3) is a found metal sculpture that describes my reunion with Butch for the summer after my first year of college. From my stock of collected items, I selected a variety of bent, straight, and broken parts and combined them with only a few key transitions that were manually edited with a torch. Each piece was then welded or screwed together. After I resolved the metal form, I turned to the problem of unity. The act of finishing the sculpture, I decided, was analogous to the care I would give my partner before a public outing. With this in mind, I resolved not to paint or linseed oil, but to boot polish. In *Spitshine* the boot polish served to unify the components visually while recalling the efforts of preservation for my precious leather resources.

Grooming I (Fig. 4) grew from a desire to explore truths in material and fashion. I began hoarding extra materials from my grandmother's stable and anyplace that was willing to donate. Baling twine collected from a nearby barn brought the familiar smells of hard labor. The hours of work I spent stacking fresh bales with my family into my grandmother's sweltering old barn, the trek to the pastures to feed hungry horses in the raw winters, and the endless cleaning of stalls rushed back to me as I held the bundle of twine.

The flood of memories compelled me to address the material with the same care and attention I offered my partner. I groomed the twine, tediously deconstructing its twists into stringy elements. With the same gallant and resourceful mindset I employ in the scrap yard, I rescued the material from its landfill burial and offered it a new purpose.

In a way, I was able to redirect its narrative and postpone a small life's death. From there, I transformed the elements into high fashion by recombining and braiding them.

The resulting form was reminiscent of my companion's tail from one of my sister's fancy hunter shows. Eight feet in length, the blonde hair featured a French style braid down the first foot ending in an excessively large pinwheel braid. Positioned on the wall at roughly rump height, the tips tickle the ground in a way that would draw envy from any fellow competitor. The familiar material became an elegant and desirable object that surpassed its reference through the gesture of dedication.

Grooming II (Fig. 6) is my further exploration of the topic. Like *Grooming I*, the piece was constructed from twine and braided. This time, however, I created a more intimately sized braid with a seemingly infinite tail pooling at the bottom. The tail connects to a found metal piece that has been polished to resemble leather. Through it, I raise questions about the absurdity of the decorative formalities of the show ring.

Custom (Fig. 7) explores the relationship of necessity and excess. A found and repaired hayrack was mounted on the corner of the gallery and paired with “custom-sized” chaps. Both the hayrack and the chaps were and decorated with gold carnauba wax. The wax emphasizes the folds on the chaps and helped transform them into an ambiguous but worn hide. The chaps are spread behind the hayrack, giving them a caged, yet painting-like appearance. I am unsure if they are living or simply hung.

CHAPTER IV

CONFIRMATION

As I explore the options that the world has to offer, I find myself visiting my parents' homes less often. There is just so much out in the world to see, work gets in the way, I cannot afford the drive. The excuses are both numerous and valid. When I do make it out to visit home, however, I am always sure to drop in to the spacious farm land in Culpeper, Virginia that my grandmother bought for retirement. My mother lives and works on the property full time caring for boarders' [renters'] horses, my grandmother's cows, and the property itself, so visiting gives me an opportunity to help her out and enjoy her company. I admit, however, that my motives for visiting are not just to see her. From the door of my vehicle, I always aim in an immediate bee line for the stall or pasture that holds my dearest treasure.

As of this writing, it has been seven years since I was able to ride and care for him regularly, yet our connection remains unchanged. On the last visit to the field for Valentine's Day, I bellowed my familiar call to arms- "Ayyy Poooo-naaaay!"- and, as a thousand times before, ears shot forward and his eyes rose to meet mine. His unruly mane and overgrown whiskers unfailingly shuffled forward to greet my eager hands. Stiff joints and a sagging spine creaked and swayed, betraying a glimpse towards the inevitable truth.

We first exchanged our greeting breaths into each other's noses, then I spoiled him with treats and reconnected with his warm fur. I took him into the barn to groom on his body and check his condition. Using soft brushes, I coaxed their bristles along the pony's fur as I dedicated the afternoon to attending to his every itch and soothing his knotted mane. In place of our old workouts and gallops through the field, we elected to walk out to the dry winter grass for a relaxing nibble. The last jump he will take, I figured, could be at any moment and I did not need be the one to take it. Though still a way from the last nap, his retirement had already produced a shadow of the athlete who used to carry us with gusto to the finish line. I mused on his aging condition while he munched at the dry grass blades. He was a monument of lessons learned, his continued presence the last fragile thread connecting me to a fading childhood.

With the two years that I have spent developing my communication skills, being challenged by the faculty to answer for my habits, and learning what encompasses my core beliefs, I feel poised to continue sculpting with reverence for my teacher's lessons. True value is often missed or taken for granted, but through my engagement in artistic work— through sculpting, drawing, writing, and otherwise making— I aim to maintain a level of awareness.

It is my hope that a viewer can engage with me in a moment of retreat from our self-absorbed quests for fame and fortune to reflect on the ideas I am presenting. Appreciation and acknowledgement are the freest and most valuable of gifts. The gesture of showing appreciation, whether through words, time, or other means, allows for the riches of respect and kindness to amass in a relationship. The spaces outside our normal

foot paths, if given acknowledgement, may reveal secrets about our own connection to the world and offer new experiences within it. My partnership with Butch, though physically transient, will forever remind me to keep searching for overlooked voices and spaces to elevate. Take nothing and no one in this life for granted.

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CATALOG OF IMAGES

Figure 1. *The Act of Second Guessing*, found steel, sky, hill, 9' x 21' x 15', 2015.

Figure 2. *Solving the Hedgehog's Dilemma with the Help of a Child*, used horse blanket, toys, deodorant, knick-knacks, 7' x 15' x 6', 2015.

Figure 3. *Spitshine*, found steel, leather, boot polish, hoof oil, 6' x 6' x 3.5', 2016.

Figure 4. *Grooming I*, baling twine, yarn, 6' x 2' x 1', 2016.

Figure 5. *Grooming II*, baling twine, yarn, found metal, leather, boot polish, 7' x 2' x 1', 2016.

Figure 6. *Custom*, found steel, carnauba wax, chaps, 7.5' x 3' x 3', 2016.



Figure 1. *The Act of Second Guessing*, found steel, sky, hill, 9' x 21' x 15', 2015.



Figure 2. *Solving the Hedgehog's Dilemma with the Help of a Child*, used horse blanket, toys, deodorant, knick-knacks, 7' x 15' x 6', 2015.



Figure 3. *Spitshine*, found steel, leather, boot polish, hoof oil, 6' x 6' x 7', 2016.



Figure 4. *Grooming I*, baling twine, yarn, 6' x 2' x 2', 2016.



Figure 5. *Grooming II*, baling twine, yarn, found metal, leather, boot polish, 7' x 2' x 1',
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Figure 6. *Custom*, found steel, carnauba wax, chaps, 7.5' x 3' x 3', 2016.